

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a dark gray color, framing the central text.

Sick and Damned

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Summary:

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Now he understood Leviticus, chapter 18, verse 22.

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But Judgment Day doesn't refer to sitting before God in his own house and having him stare into Richie's permanently sick soul. It refers to who came knocking at Richie's house. None other than Eddie Kaspbrak. Five years later, Eddie makes Richie feel just as nauseous as he did when he wore those stupid shorts when he was 13 years old.

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Author's Note:

Inspired heavily by the song Biking (Solo Version) by Frank Ocean

The Cross glares over the faces of the hundreds of sinners who sit in the pews of the church auditorium. Sinners like Ben and Jamie Brown who steal from the offering plate, or Mr. Elertson who divorced his wife. There are probably liars, cheaters and scammers littering the church as the pastor holds his Bible above his head, his face red and sweaty while he preaches. He preaches from the book of Leviticus, chapter 18, verse 22.

A man should not lay with a man as he does a woman.

In the pews sits a 10-year-old Richie Tozier. He tries his hardest to focus and stay quiet. He tries to listen, but it's hard. Maggie and Wentworth Tozier - his parents - sit on either side of him. His mother rests a hand on his thigh whenever he spaces out, staring right past the preacher. He's supposed to listen when the pastor is talking. He knows.

On their way home, Richie looks out the window and watches the trees blur past their station wagon. He asks his parents what Leviticus, chapter 18, verse 22 means.

Wentworth glances between Maggie and the road, unsure of how to explain that to a 10-year-old.

“Um,” Maggie starts. “You see, Rich, God is telling us that men and women belong together. He means that it’s a sin for a man to love another man, as he should a woman.” She explains, tentatively. “Men who love other men are...sick, okay, Richie? They are sick and they need to be healed.”

“It’s a sin to be sick?” Richie asks, his mind clouding with confusion. How can God be mad at someone for being sick, it’s not like they could have prevented it.

“No, no. It’s...a sin to love other men. Do you understand?”

Richie doesn’t understand, but he nods. There are some things kids just don’t understand.

Maggie Tozier loved romance movies. Sometimes she would drink too much wine and she would sit on the couch in the living room, a romance movie playing on the television. Richie would quietly sit on the stairs, even though he was meant to be asleep.

Sparks. The men kissed the women and they felt them. Sometimes it was fireworks.

A 12-year-old Richie established that the sparks were bullshit when he kissed Jennifer Cook under the bleachers during lunch in 7th grade. He didn’t really like Jennifer, but it was common knowledge that if you were a kissless virgin by 8th grade, you might as well dig your own social grave. So Richie kissed Jennifer, and he felt no sparks.

Were romance movies all bullshit?

At 13, Richie understands fear when he sees his best friend, Eddie Kaspbrak at the quarry, wearing brand new red shorts. The shorts were far too short, and Richie's heart skipped a beat, just like the hearts in the romance movies did. Then his heart skipped again, but it wasn't because of Eddie, it was because he was suddenly terrified.

Now he understood Leviticus, chapter 18, verse 22.

The following Sunday Richie went to a prayer session when he was supposed to go to his own youth service. He entered the small dining hall that the church had fashioned into a makeshift prayer room.

Because the church was small, the prayer leader knew Richie.

"Richard, hello." He said, smiling warmly.

"Just Richie." He responds.

The prayer leader nods. "Of course. What brings you in."

And with that Richie feels the fear he felt at the quarry but magnified. "I'm sick." He tells the prayer leader.

The prayer leader says, “Oh dear.” Before he pulls Richie to sit at one of the tables in the hall. He clutches both of Richie’s small hands from across the table. “Tell me about it.”

So Richie does. He tells him that he thinks he’s getting sick because his mom told him that when boys liked other boys, they were sick. He wanted to be cured before it got worse. He pretended not to be hurt when the prayer leader draws his hands away and pretends to search for something in his pockets, but he never brings his hands back.

“Well, Richie, that’s...an awful lot to take in.” He sighs.

“I want to be healed.” Richie says. “I don’t want to be sick.”

The prayer leader tells him that he has to pray every night, to ask God to be forgiven of his sins and his sinful thoughts. He tells Richie that he needs to discipline himself, train himself to not look at boys the way he should girls.

“Discipline?” He asks.

“You know, like, when you were little and you’d lie to your mom and she’d give you a spanking. Then you were too scared to lie to your mom, right?”

Richie nods.

This is why when Richie turns 14, and starts smoking with Beverly Marsh, and the sinful thoughts won't go away and he remains sick, he starts putting cigarettes out on the inside of his forearm. For a while, too, it works. But rather than scaring himself out of thinking about boys, he scares himself from looking at boys altogether. He can manage to be around Ben, Mike and Stan. Bill? Too pretty. And Eddie? God, Eddie will never not make him feel sick.

Is this what healing feels like? Like scorched skin and 2nd-degree burns? Or maybe it feels like isolation. Maybe both.

Despite his best efforts, Richie's friends aren't so delusional when Richie wears his jean jacket or ratty flannels through late spring, even into summer.

At lunch, Eddie nudges him, sending chills down Richie's spine. "You know it's hot as balls out, right?"

"You know I'm not an astrologist, Eddie-Bear."

"Two things," Eddie's face scrunches up, and Richie's stomach follows suit. "One, don't call me that. And two, the word you're looking for is meteorologist."

Richie wants to vomit.

“Richie, it’s like 92 degrees, what’s with the layers?” Beverly asks as she finds him out back of the school, where they usually met to share a cigarette.

“Style knows no temperature, Miss Marsh.” Richie says as he lights up his cigarette.

He takes a drag before passing it to Beverly. It’s then that the boys’ gym class comes into view, wandering onto the baseball field. All of them in their stupid gym shorts that made Richie feel sick. And there he is again, Eddie fucking Kaspbrak. He squeezed his eyes shut and tries to avert his gaze.

After about 5 minutes of passing a Marlboro between the two of them, Beverly tells Richie she has to go back to class and pecks his cheek before running off. Richie puts the cigarette out on his forearm.

When Richie turns 16, he gets a girlfriend, and for the first time, he thinks he might be healed. That is, until his girlfriend, Holly Reed has him pressed up against an unfamiliar bedroom wall. They’re at a party, and Richie’s had more to drink than he knows he can handle. He thinks it might help him forget about how uninterested he is in Holly.

Her lips are pressed against his, swallowing him - or so it feels like it. He is drowning, he thinks. He can’t breathe. Holly’s hands roam his body, and his skin prickles anywhere her hands’ touch. Her hands grip the collar of his shirt and she tugs him back, and a couple steps later and they tumble into a bed. Richie is in uncharted territory as he’s lying on top of Holly Reed, their lips pressed together, mouths slotted open, Holly’s tongue in his mouth. He feels like throwing up. Holly begins to tug at the hem of his shirt. He breaks away, and

much to his surprise, instead of a deep breath like he'd planned, a sob escapes his mouth.

Holly's eyes widen and she scoots out from under Richie, moving to hold his face.

"Richie? Richie, what is it?" She asks, gently.

He can't even see Holly. He's wearing his glasses, but he just sees blurred doubles. The abundance of tears in his eyes doesn't help the case either. Richie can't even hear Holly trying to help over the sound of his own sobs.

He passes out that night.

He's getting sicker, he thinks when he wakes up. And not just because he feels physically sick. Holly is asleep next to him, and his heart races, but he knows it's the fear again. Richie leaves Holly in the bed and he goes home. He breaks up with her the next day.

A year later and Richie's arms are littered with burn marks, and now his arms are becoming a canvas for harm. When the burning stops being effective, he upgrades to using his switchblade. Into his own arm, he carves the word Fag.

That's when his friends notice the isolation part of the healing process. Missed movie nights, skipping lunch to sit by himself and smoke, not going to the quarry on the weekends. It starts out as

occasional but then it becomes a regular thing. Though, despite their best efforts to figure out what's going on, they can't. Not even his best friend Eddie can figure out what's wrong with Richie.

At 17 Richie starts going to parties alone and drinking himself to incapacitation because the sickness has become more like a full-fledged virus. He can't be sick if he's barely conscious. Well, not mentally at least. Though, tonight was different. Tonight the alcohol wasn't working. He lost track of how much he'd drank, but he could still feel the sickness in his mind. The sick was overtaken by anger. He was angry. He was angry at himself, and he was angry that the alcohol wasn't helping him.

That is why Richie got into a fight that night, which is consequently how Richie gets the shit beat out of him by the host of the party and his limp, bleeding and beaten body is left on the kitchen floor. Holly Reed, who happens to be at the party, calls one of Richie's friends to collect him.

It ends up being Mike Hanlon.

"Hey, Mike?" Holly says into the receiver. "Richie's here at Harley's party and I...I think you need to come get him." She says before hanging up.

And so Mike does. Mike pulls up in front of Harley's house and tentatively walks through the front door. He's not sure what could've gone so wrong that Richie's ex-girlfriend felt the need to call him, but he quickly finds out when he's directed to the kitchen where he finds Richie out cold and bleeding on the floor. His gut twists at the sight of his friend like that. But he swallows the feeling and bends over Richie and rests a hand on his shoulder. He shakes him.

“Rich?” Mike says gently.

Nothing.

Mike sighs and wraps an arm under Richie’s torso. He begins to lift Richie’s dead weight, hoisting him over his shoulder. He feels almost like he’s humiliating Richie as he carries him out of the party, but he knows there’s no other way to get him out of there.

Mike takes him back to his own home. He knows Richie’s dad would kill him if he saw him in this state. He’d rather Richie not come home at all. So Mike takes him to the farm and carries him up to his room. His grandparents are already in bed, and he doesn’t worry about disturbing them.

Richie’s sweating, Mike notices. His hair is slick to his forehead. He strips Richie’s jacket off, and he immediately gasps when he notices the scars and burn marks absolutely covering Richie’s arms.

“Holy shit.” He mouths.

He backs away, unsure of what to do or think. He doesn’t know what to do. What does one do in a situation like this? Discovering a grave secret decorating one of your best friend’s arms? It all makes sense now, though. The ditching, the skipping, the isolation. He steps closer to inspect, and that’s when he sees the word “Fag” carved into Richie’s arm.

Mike gently shakes Richie. After a moment, he stirs.

“Richie, hey.” Mike whispers. “It’s Mike.”

“M-Mike?” He says, his voice dripping in drunkenness.

“Yea, buddy, you look like you got roughed up pretty bad.”

Richie jolts up, startling Mike. “My jacket.” He sputters. “I need it, my jacket.”

Suddenly, Richie is hyper-aware of the cold air hitting his bare arms as he sits in front of Mike. He spots the jacket at the foot of the bed and lurches forward to grab it, but his body is lopsided and heavy, causing him to crumple out of bed and to the floor. His vision swims and his ears ring. Hands are on him and he jerks away, which causes his stomach to pinch uncomfortably, threatening him with nausea.

“Richie,” Mike warns. “You’re drunk, just...slow down.”

Richie lies on the floor, about a foot from Mike.

“You shouldn’t have brought me here.” Richie slurs, tilting his head to look at Mike.

“You were blacked out on the floor, bleeding. What was I supposed to do?”

“Leave me there.”

“Richie, what the fuck is going on with you?” Mike finally asks what everyone had been thinking.

Richie turns to look at the ceiling and blinks slowly. His arms burn with exposure. He can feel Mike staring at them. He can feel his eyes burning through his flesh as though his eyes were cigarettes, training him to fear his own mind.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Richie says, his voice lacks conviction.

“You’ve been avoiding all of us for months, you won’t even *look* at Eddie anymore, you start going to parties of people you hate, you drink more than I’ve seen anyone else drink, and then the arms? What the *fuck* is going on?”

Richie sits up slowly, ignoring how nauseous it made him. He moves to stand and Mike follows suit. At 17 years old Mike stands a towering 6’3”, 4 inches taller than Richie. But Richie stands his ground, the best he can with weak, unresponsive limbs. He tries to push past Mike to grab his jacket but Mike just grabs his shoulders, holding him in place.

“Move.” Richie demands.

“No, not until you tell me what’s going on with you.”

Richie weakly shoves Mike. “ *Nothing* is going on.” He slurs, but you can still hear the sternness in his voice.

“Bullshit.”

Richie hits him. Not hard, just a half-hearted punch to the chest.

“ *Move.* ”

Mike remains.

And Richie hits him again, and before he can even figure out what’s going on, he’s pounding on Mike’s chest as he begins to sob. He keeps pleading with Mike to move. In a matter of moments, Richie’s slumped against Mike, slowly becoming dead weight against him as he cries. Mike wraps strong arms around Richie’s shoulders, trying to hold him up as he sobs.

Richie passes out and Mike lets him sleep in his bed.

They never speak about that night again but Mike can't not think about Richie's abused arms every time he sees him, which albeit is a dwindling amount. He doesn't tell anyone, although he knows he should.

Then comes Judgement Day. Richie's 18 now, and he's run out of room to mark up his arms, (he's using his hips now). He still attends church every Sunday, even though his parents have stopped attending years ago. But he's still sick, so he has to go. He can feel the glare of the Cross burning through him, into his soul. He thinks he's going to be sick before the service ends. Sick enough that he sits in his car, head resting on his arms as they cross over his steering wheel. His shoulders rise and fall and his chest aches. This is an every week occurrence. Sometimes he actually gets sick and throws up next to his car before sobbing against his steering wheel. Then he goes home and pretends like he feels enlightened.

But Judgment Day doesn't refer to sitting before God in his own house and having him stare into Richie's permanently sick soul. It refers to who came knocking at Richie's house. None other than Eddie Kaspbrak. Five years later, Eddie makes Richie feel just as nauseous as he did when he wore those stupid shorts when he was 13 years old.

"Eddie? What are you doing here?" Richie asks, his voice shakes.

"We need to talk." Eddie says, his voice equally as shaky.

Richie, although reluctantly, lets Eddie in and he leads him to his bedroom.

Judgement Day refers to Eddie Kaspbrak asking to see Richie's arms.

"What? Why?"

"Do you remember a few months ago, you went to Harley's party?"

Richie goes to a lot of parties, and he barely remembers any of them. He shakes his head.

"You...got drunk."

"Sounds like something I'd do." Richie nods as he sits in his bed, Eddie remains stood by the closed door.

"You got into a fight, and Mike had to come get you." Eddie details.

Then Richie remembers. He remembers the burning sensation he felt in his skin as he lied on Mike's bedroom floor while Mike's eyes stared at Richie's arms.

There's a deafening silence between the two. Richie refuses to look at Eddie, but he can feel the glare like he can the Cross. He can't tell what he's feeling, whether it's fear, guilt or shame. Perhaps all three. Maybe he's just drowning in all three. He wishes he was really drowning. He wants to sink to the bottom of the ocean where he won't have to live sick, and he won't have to burn his skin and carve slurs into his skin to remind him who he is. *What* he is. Sick. A

faggot. Infected with a sinful virus.

“Richie,” Eddie says, his tone so soft you almost wouldn’t hear it.
“Richie, look at me.”

Richie hadn’t noticed that Eddie had moved closer, now crouching before him. Richie looked at him and he felt the familiar queasy feeling in his stomach. God, Eddie was beautiful and Richie hated it.

Eddie pinches Richie’s sleeve between his fingers, and for some reason Richie lets him push the sleeve up to his elbow. Eddie pulls the sleeve down almost as quickly, squeezing his eyes shut.

“God, Rich, what have you done to yourself?” He whispers.

Richie can feel a bile in his throat as he restrains the tears in his eyes. “It’s nothing.” He says, and he knows how ridiculous he sounds with Eddie’s hand wrapped around his wrists, holding his sleeves down so he doesn’t have to look at the pain he’s inflicted on himself.

“Richie, please-” Eddie begins to plead.

“It’s *nothing* .” He repeats cutting Eddie off.

“You can *talk* to me.” Eddie whispers, his voice warbles.

Richie's crying then. He slumps forward, his head falling to Eddie's shoulder. Eddie brings his hand up to rest on the back of Richie's head, petting his hair, trying to soothe him.

"It's okay." He soothes, knowing it's not okay. It's very far from okay.

"I'm sick." Richie whispers, his voice thick with pain.

"I know." Eddie says though he doesn't know. I mean, it's clear Richie's not mentally well. Anyone who saw his arms would say the same.

"No, Eddie, I'm...I'm like." He can't even find the words. "I'm -" the word comes out so quiet. "Gay."

Eddie pulls away from him and narrows his eyes at Richie. "You think that makes you sick?"

"Doesn't it? That's what everyone's been telling me since I was 10. Parents, pastors, prayer leaders, kids at school. Why else do I feel like throwing up every single fucking time I see you? Because I'm *sick* . I'm sick, and I'm damned to hell because of it."

Eddie chooses to ignore the part about him. "Is that why you did this to yourself?" He says, his hand squeezing his rest, indicating he was referring to Richie's arms.

“Yes.”

“Richie....” He whispers softly.

“I’m sick.” Richie repeats because it’s all he can say.

Eddie reaches up and cups Richie’s face and Richie’s skin prickles at the touch. But it’s different than when Holly Reed touched him. It’s like electricity sparkling over his skin wherever Eddie’s skin meets his.

“Is a person who was born with...let’s say a heart defect damned to hell?” Eddie asks.

“What? No, of course not.” Richie’s brows knit together in confusion.

“Why not?”

“Because they were born with it, like you said.”

“Richie, *you* were born with this.” Eddie whispers. His voice hitches at his next words. “And so was I.”

Richie’s gaze snaps up to look at Eddie.

“So if you’re sick and damned, so am I.” Eddie says, his voice breaking at the end of his sentence.

There’s another nauseating silence between them. Richie feels numb. There’s too much to feel, so he opts to feel nothing until Eddie’s thumb gently rubs his temple.

He feels that. He thinks he could feel that forever.

“Richie?” Eddie whispers.

“What?”

“Can...” he trails off before taking a deep breath and trying again. “Can I kiss you?”

Richie could vomit. But he wants this. Hell, he’s wanted it since he was 13, so he harbours as much courage as he has and he nods.

Eddie inches towards him painfully slow, his grip on his face remains gentle. Their lips meet and it’s so gentle as if Eddie thinks he might break Richie. And there they are. The sparks. The kiss is over as quickly as it starts, but Eddie remains close, touching their foreheads together.

“Again,” Richie whispers.

Eddie obliges, moving to kiss Richie again. It’s longer this time. Eddie moves to sit on Richie’s bed, next to him. Richie drinks Eddie in, trying to cling to the feeling. It’s a deeper kiss, their heads slotted against each other. He desperately wanted more of this. Even though he *knew* it was sick.

How can something that feels so *right* be wrong? Richie doesn’t want to be right as he drags Eddie into him, their chests flush to one another.

Richie kissed a lot of girls. Most of the time he was shit faced and could barely distinguish the girls. But boys? This was right.

He was sober, but the feeling of Eddie’s lips against his own was intoxicating.

“More,” Richie mumbled against Eddie’s lips without thinking

It takes Eddie by surprise, and he feels a strong sense of reluctance to give into Richie. Richie’s broken, that’s clear as day, and as much as Eddie would love to give Richie more, he’s not sure if that’s what he needs right now.

Eddie pulls away and Richie groans.

“Eddie,” He whines.

“Slow down.” Eddie cautions Richie. “This is new for you, just...take it easy.”

“I’ve been moving in slow motion for 5 years, Eddie, I’m ready. *Please* .” Now it’s Richie who’s begging, and despite himself, Eddie doesn’t have the strength to not give into him.

Eddie smashes their lips together, falling back on Richie’s bed, pulling him down with him. Richie’s knee plants itself between Eddie’s thighs as he deepens the kiss. Richie’s groaning into Eddie’s mouth. He doesn’t want to stop, but suddenly the groaning stops and something feels wrong, so Eddie pulls away to find tears streaming down Richie’s face.

“Richie...” Eddie whispers, touching his face. “What is it?”

Richie doesn’t answer, instead, he drops his head onto Eddie’s shoulder, slumps against him and sobs. Eddie, although started, doesn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around Richie. Their hearts pound against each other’s chests, out of sync but together nonetheless.

Leviticus, chapter 18, verse 22 becomes a lot more complicated in Richie’s head as he lays in his own bed, Eddie’s arms wrapped tightly around him, and both their lips kiss swollen. His head is clouded, and he’s terrified, but for the first time in a really long time he feels like he’s *healing* .

He makes it more complicated when he tells Eddie he loves him.